Angela Barreto Xavier and Ines G. Županov

Catholic Orientalism. Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge (16th–18th Centuries).

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Between the early sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries a vast amount of knowledge about South Asia was accumulated by Catholics living and working in the Indian sub-continent. Some were Propaganda missionaries directly responsible to the papacy; others, especially towards the end of the period, had French connections. But the overwhelming majority comprised Portuguese, Indo-Portuguese or other European Catholics operating within the framework of Portugal's Asian empire. Among them were *fidalgos*, traders, members of the religious orders and Christianized Brahmans. At first they were predominantly laymen, but later—especially from the early seventeenth century—the great majority was made up of Catholic religious. Angela Barreto Xavier and Ines G. Županov call these cultural intermediaries, collectively, Catholic Orientalists. But, apart from a handful of well-known individuals among them, such as Dom João de Castro, Garçia de Orta, and Henrique Henriques, these Catholic Orientalists and their remarkable achievements have received from historians scant attention. In the present work, Xavier and Županov seek to make up for this neglect, presenting a mass of evidence to demonstrate the extraordinary depth of knowledge about Asia, Asians, and Asian cultures that was acquired, and transmitted to Europe by these Catholic, mainly Portuguese, Orientalist intermediaries, during the two and a half centuries after Vasco da Gama's great voyage of discovery.

The first phase of Catholic Orientalism occurred during the early decades of the sixteenth century. This was pre-eminently an era of pioneer “imperial mapping” and interest in India and other parts of Asia was intense. In fact, as the two authors here remind us, many of the finest Portuguese literary classics of the era were replete with Asian subject matter—including João de Barros's *Asia*, Dom João de Castro's *Roteiros*, and the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires, all of which were written in the sixteenth century by Portuguese laymen. However, after an initial period when most of the Portuguese involved in acquiring Asian knowledge were laymen, from the late sixteenth century the leading role was increasingly assumed by members of the religious orders, particularly the Jesuits. Of course their aims were tendentious. They studied Indian languages, and Indian religious beliefs and practices, to determine how best to dismantle the latter and replace them with Catholicism. So the Society of Jesus required its missionaries to learn Konkani, Tamil, and other contemporary Indian languages, at the same time encouraging the study of Sanskrit religious texts. This led in turn to the production of a plethora of uncoordinated grammars,

dictionaries, and translations, many of which were never published and whose authors are now mostly unknown.

Like the Jesuits, the Franciscans believed it was essential to preach in Indian languages, and placed much stress on acquiring linguistic skills. However, while the Jesuits working in Asia were almost all Europeans, many of the Franciscans were India-born and bred—and therefore already quite accustomed to the host cultures. (The two most renowned and prolific Franciscan Orientalist writers of the seventeenth century—Frei António da Purificação and Frei Paulo da Trindade—were both Asia-born). Goan Brahmins were another distinctive group that contributed to Catholic Orientalism, particularly from the late seventeenth century. All in all, Catholic Orientalism produced an extraordinarily rich and diverse body of knowledge—but it was knowledge deeply fragmented and hard to access. Viewed with disdain by the Protestant British, who dominated the Indian scene from the late eighteenth century, and with its archives scattered and uncoordinated, the Catholic Orientalist tradition was long forgotten or simply ignored. Only recently has significant interest in it been rekindled—not least by the present two authors.

What, then, have Xavier and Županov here achieved? Firstly, they have identified and described Catholic Orientalism as the search for, acquisition of, and dissemination of, inside knowledge about Asia and Asians, by Catholics, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. But their understanding and use of the term Orientalism differ from those of Edward Said, who invented and popularized the concept. To Said Orientalism signified more the accumulation of distorted Western “representations” of the Orient, than the gathering of objective knowledge about it. But Xavier and Županov lay little stress on this distinction, instead simply describing the knowledge they have traced and identified, in all its profusion and variety, and explaining where the records may now be found. They show that today all this material lies widely scattered, often surviving precariously in obscure locations after suffering many losses inflicted by the inroads of time, and of such major disasters as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. For long consigned to obscurity, and little known even to specialist historians of the Portuguese presence in Asia, Catholic Orientalist writings constitute a rich and exciting resource for future research, particularly in the areas of social interaction and cultural exchange. The publication of *Catholic Orientalism*, along with Alexander S. Wilkinson's recent three-volume *Iberian Books* (Leiden: Brill, 2013–15), will be much appreciated, particularly by those interested in the history of Luso-Asian culture contact and interaction.

Inevitably, the picture the authors paint, and the views they espouse, generate their own questions. For instance they suggest the existence of a seventeenth century “gap.” Why was the seventeenth century, especially its first half,

such a relatively barren period for lay Orientalists compared with the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries? Major seventeenth-century Portuguese figures such as Viceroy Vidigueira or Viceroy Linhares apparently took no or little interest in acquiring Asian knowledge, whereas some of their sixteenth-century predecessors were far more inquiring. Then there is the claim, made here repeatedly, that the alleged persistent belittling of Portuguese Catholic Orientalism by proponents of late eighteenth/nineteenth-century British Protestant Orientalism played a key role in the decline of the former. Yet, without denying unhelpful hostility from Protestant Orientalists, or that Catholic Orientalism was deprived of much of its vitality in the nineteenth century, the decline of the latter would almost certainly have occurred, regardless of the stance taken by Protestant Orientalists.

The traditional preoccupations of historians writing about the Portuguese in Asia before 1800 have been economic, institutional or mission history. But here, refreshingly, the two authors are concerned with cultural interactions and the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge concerning the “other.” As such, they could be said to be part of a new wave in Portuguese historical writing—one that has developed largely as a consequence of the growing trend among younger Portuguese scholars to read and speak fluent English and consequently be more aware of mainstream historiography as it is developing outside Portugal. Containing a treasure trove of information, much of it from obscure and hard to access sources, this book is likely to prove an invaluable work of reference for many years to come.

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